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ABSTRACT

This article reports on the survey "Remedial Education at Higher Education Institutions in Fall 1995," which was conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics. It is suggested that administrators and practitioners who deal with basic writing and other remedial programs will learn little about the nature of remedial efforts from the survey. The article finds that the survey seems to be intended to be used for state and national political decision making rather than for educational purposes. According to the article, flaws in the survey include no definition of remedial courses, such as, for example, students scoring below a particular number on an entrance exam--instead, remedial courses were defined as "courses in reading, writing, or mathematics for college students lacking those skills necessary to perform college-level work." The article points out that the survey's overall finding was that 71% of institutions offered remedial writing courses, but that this ranged from 99% of public 2-year colleges down to 52% of private 4-year institutions. The article suggests that these findings could be significant for legislators in states which are thinking of ending remedial courses in 4-year public colleges and universities--publicly stated purposes are to force remedial students into community colleges where remediation is less expensive. The article also considers some of the other statistics on remedial writing outlined in the survey. (NKA)

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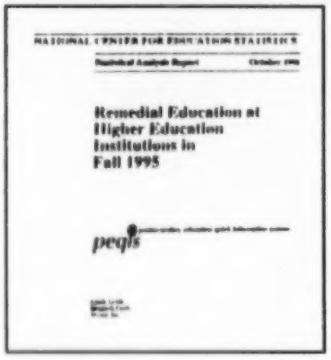
NEWSLETTER FOR WRITING TEACHERS

Survey of remedial education in higher education more relevant to politics than to teaching and curriculum



Administrators and practitioners of basic writing and other remedial programs will learn little about the nature of remedial efforts from the survey

Bill McCleary

If you want to know how many colleges and universities offer basic writing, a new survey about remedial education can give you the answer: About 71% of all institutions in higher education offer courses in basic writing. However, if you want to know something pedagogically useful such as how basic writing is defined at various institutions or how it is taught or what methods have been found to be successful, the survey is no help at all.

The conclusion is inescapable, therefore, that the survey is intended to be used for state and national political decision-making rather than for educational purposes. This is buttressed by the introduction to the study, which says that there is an "ongoing debate" about "the role of remediation in higher education" and that the study is intended "to inform this ongoing debate" (1-2). Also, since the survey covers such subjects as whether remedial courses are given college credit and where remedial programs are located within the institution—subjects often under hot debate on campuses themselves—the survey should be of use in campus politics as well.

Of course, one might think that it would "inform this ongoing debate" if those doing the debating knew about the difficulties of defining what is remedial and what is not, especially in the case of writing. Also, they might find it enlightening to know what would happens in a college or university that ends all remedial courses. Might it happen, for example, that the institution would continue to accept the same students and then would find another way of compensating for poor writing skills? For instance, might the faculty develop self-defense mechanisms like not assigning writing in order

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Data on Remedial Writing Programs in Higher Education

Type of Institution	Number with freshmen	Percent offering remedial writing	Mean number of remedial writing courses	Percent of entering freshmen in remedial writing courses	Mean number of students passing remedial writing
All institutions	3,060	71	2.0	17	79
Public 2-year	950	99	2.7	25	71
Private 2-year	350	61	1.2	18	81
Public 4-year	550	71	1.5	12	81
Private 4-year	1,200	52	1.4	8	88
High minority enrollment	340	85	2.4	29	71
Low minority enrollment	2,720	70	1.9	15	80

Type of Institution	*Percent giving each form of credit for remedial writing courses*				*Percent requiring remedial writing*		*Percent using each type of placement for courses in remedial writing*			
	Degree credit, subject	Degree credit elective	Institutional credit	No credit	Required	Recommended but not required	Placement tests for all	Placement tests only by criteria	Placement only by criteria	Other
All institutions	4	17	68	11	79	21	60	25	9	7
Public 2-year	2	8	81	9	70	30	69	22	2	7
Private 2-year	11	4	66	19	84	16	74	20	0	0
Public 4-year	6	11	71	12	86	14	48	27	18	7
Private 4-year	5	39	46	10	86	14	47	28	17	7
High minority enrollment	4	4	70	22	79	21	68	25	2	4
Low minority enrollment	4	19	67	9	79	21	58	24	10	7

Type of Institution	*Location within institution of remedial writing courses by percent of institutions*				*Percent offering ESL courses*	*Whether ESL courses are considered remedial (% of those that offer ESL)*		
	Separate remedial division	Traditional academic department	Learning center	Other		All ESL courses are remedial	Some ESL courses are remedial	No ESL courses are remedial
All institutions	22	67	8	2	47	38	24	38
Public 2-year	30	59	8	3	55	55	31	15
Private 2-year	7	87	4	4	24	(#)	(#)	(#)
Public 4-year	20	71	6	3	58	35	17	48
Private 4-year	17	69	11	2	42	16	25	58
High minority enrollment	35	53	11	1	55	42	39	19
Low minority enrollment	20	69	8	3	46	37	22	41

to be spared the pain of reading it? But perhaps these questions are too subtle for decision-makers to deal with. (If I sound disgusted about the level of debate on this issue, it's because I am.)

At any rate: The survey was published in October 1996 and has been covered extensively in various newspapers since then. It is called "Remedial Education at Higher Education Institutions in Fall 1995" and was conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), U.S. Department of Education. It touches on all areas of remediation in higher education but concentrates on the three most common—reading, writing, and math. I will concentrate on writing for this report, but if you're interested in other subjects a note at the end of this piece will tell you how to obtain a copy of the whole report.

The study was done as part of the NCES *PEQUIS* series. *PEQUIS* stands for "postsecondary education quick information system" and consists of surveys that should take no more than a half hour for someone at the responding institution to complete. Like most surveys, it is based on a sample of institutions, in this case 797 institutions out of 847 that received the survey form. This high response rate occurs because NCES has a regular panel of institutions, referred to as the PEQUIS panel, that have agreed to respond to these surveys. The 847 was a subsample of the PEQUIS panel. They represent "the universe of approximately 3,540 2-year and 4-year (including graduate-level) higher education institutions in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, including institutions that do not enroll freshmen" (40).

There was no attempt to quantify a definition of remedial courses for the survey such as students scoring below such-and-such a score on such-and-such an entrance exam. Instead, remedial courses were simply "defined as courses in reading, writing, or mathematics for college students lacking those skills necessary to perform college-level work at the level required by the institution." The questionnaire used the word "remedial" to refer to such courses but asked respondents to include any courses considered remedial regardless of the name. This means, the report acknowledges, that "what constituted remedial courses varied from institution to institution" (2).

Each table in the PEQUIS report covered all three remedial subjects, so for our purposes I have taken out only those figures relating to composition and have created the three large composite tables that you will find on p. 2. Since you can read these tables for yourself, I will only point out and comment on some of the more interesting findings.

• As was noted above, the overall finding of the survey is that 71% of all institutions offered remedial writing in 1995. However, as can be seen in the topmost table, this varied widely by type of institution. It ranged from 99% of all public 2-year colleges down to 52% of private 4-year institutions.

These findings would seem to be significant for legislators in states such as mine who are thinking of (or, in the case of California, have finished deciding on) ending remedial courses in the 4-year public colleges and universities. The publicly stated purposes are to force remedial students into community colleges where remediation is less expensive, to motivate high school students to work harder so that they won't need remediation, and to force the public schools to improve education so that less remediation will be necessary. The result—over the short range at least—could be to reduce student bodies at the public 4-year institutions. However, one suspects from past experience that such institutions will prove more creative than legislators expect in how they deal with matter. The institution that wants to retain its traditional students can set up tutoring services, summertime "precollege" programs, special sections of credit-bearing freshman composition courses that a student is intended to retake several times before receiving the credit, or other such compensatory programs. I'm not saying that such programs are subterfuges, but they do allow the institution to say that it has no remedial *courses* while still accepting the same students it has always accepted and carrying out enough organized remediation to retain them.

• The mean number of remedial writing courses ranges from 2.7 at community colleges to 1.2 at private two-year colleges. Though the survey document doesn't say so, this difference may not be as great as it seems because of the status of ESL courses. The last three columns on the page show that in the majority of community colleges, ESL courses are always or almost always counted as remedial, while at the private 4-year colleges (which claim, on average, to have only 1.4 remedial writing courses), ESL courses are not considered remedial. That ESL courses are not necessarily writing courses is a distinction that might escape decision-makers. Both ESL and writing courses are "English" courses and may be lumped together in most minds.

• Only 23% of all institutions still give credit for remedial composition. This is the outcome of the turmoil that many schools went through a few years back about whether to give credit for remedial courses. My own school at the time had been giving credit since its founding in the late sixties and, as one of those teaching basic writing (which we called "developmental"), I favored continuing this practice but eventually lost the argument. As the tables show, this battle has been settled nearly everywhere along the same lines. Almost 80 percent of all schools give only institutional credit (counting toward financial aid and full-time status but not toward graduation) or no credit.

As has been pointed out elsewhere, those of us who established these courses may be at least partially responsible for what happened because we agreed to call them "pre-college." In fact, if we define a subject as pre-college because students could have learned it in high school, nearly all freshman courses are pre-college. For instance, the freshman math course I took in college was almost identical to the advanced algebra I'd taken in high school, and first-semester college chemistry was very similar to eleventh-grade chemistry. Both courses were taught as though we students had never taken advanced algebra or beginning chemistry, and I must confess that the professors were right to do so; few of us seemed to remember anything from high school.

The situation is even more dubious in the case of composition. My high school English courses included almost no composition, and I don't see that things have changed much since then. How, then, can it be said that colleges are "remediating" subjects that were never taught in the first place. "Remedial" composition was renamed as "developmental" in many schools in an effort to try to convey the truth of the matter, but it appears that in most cases this name change did no good.

• In about four out of five cases (i.e., almost 80% of the time), remedial composition courses are required for those students identified as being in need of remediation. This ranges from 70% in community colleges to 86% in both public and private 4-year institutions.

• Students are placed in remedial composition by means of placement tests in 85% of all cases. Most schools give the placement tests to everyone, but about a quarter give them only to students meeting certain criteria (probably below a certain cut-off point on the SAT, ACT, or high school grades). Once again, however, the figures do not tell composition faculty what we would

(continued on p. 7)

Survey of remedial courses (cont. from p. 3)

like to know most of all—the nature of the placement tests. If the majority of institutions uses actual writing (rather than multiple choice tests), that would be helpful to know.

- In two thirds of all schools, the remedial writing courses are housed in a traditional academic department. Only public 2-year colleges frequently house remedial courses in departments of their own.

- There is a substantial difference on nearly all measures between institutions with a "high minority enrollment" and those with low minority enrollments. The figures for high-minority institutions are most similar to those of 2-year colleges.

If you would like to see the figures for reading and math in addition to those for composition, the report is free and comes in paper or electronic form. It can be obtained by mail from the National Center for Education Statistics, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, 555 New Jersey Ave., N.W., Washgton 20208. It is also available on the Web in Portable Document Format (PDF). If you have never downloaded a PDF file before, you will find it an "interesting" experience. The URL is:http://www.ed.gov/NCES/pubs/97584.html